

Midnight Waffles by Gazyrlezon

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen

Language: English

Characters: Eleven | Jane Hopper, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-10-26

Updated: 2018-10-27

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:54:24

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 2

Words: 8,618

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it sooner. It couldn't be. Last he'd seen her he'd been fourteen, going on fifteen ... and yet here she was. Hair going gray, sure, a few wrinkles on her face; the years did not just pass one by unnoticed. And yet ...

"El ..." the name was a whisper, barely audible above the sounds from the streets.

Her face was a smile. "Hello Mike. I wondered how long I'd take you to figure it out."

1. Midnight Waffles

Night's chill greeted Mike when he finally stepped out the train. His legs hurt. The sun was long gone; only a few brave lights tried to illuminate the platform, everything else was dark. Vaguely, he could guess the outlines of the surrounding houses. Large, standing apart from each other. A suburb, then.

The lone electric sign on the platform proclaimed it was 22:37, and there'd be no further connections today. Boarding for his plane had started seven minutes ago. Shit.

He knew he should not have planned it this tight; he would have had to run even if there'd been no delay. But even if he had a few bestsellers to his name; his budget was still finite, and the temptation of saving himself that one last night in a hotel had simply been too powerful.

At least it wasn't winter yet. Early autumn, not really warm by any means, but still bearable. Mentally, Mike went through his wallet: twenty dollars, thirty euro, a few useless other coins: forgotten florints and korunas he'd forgotten to change back.

What now? Should he take his cellphone out and make a picture? Maybe send it to his dad, as he'd done from every other place he'd been to, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Budapest and Prague? Not that his father would look at what his son had sent him; the last *has-read*-tick in their chat was three months old. Mostly it was Mike's way of taunting him. See, dad? You're rotting away in that tatty old La-Z-boy while I'm out and seeing the world, so fuck you and all your oh-so-nice *concerns* about your son's profession as an author of fantasy.

But this ... he could almost hear him. See, son? Told you, you'll end up at some godforsaken subway station sleeping with the other useless hobo-jobs, you just wait!

Honestly, it wasn't even a proper subway station; just a platform in the middle of nowhere, with not so much as a ticket vendor. Also, it was too short; he'd had to walk through half the train before getting

off, maneuvering his luggage through rows and rows of empty seats.

Still, his father would be wrong. Mike was no junkie, and this was not Chicago or New York or any of the other great American junkie-capitals his dad might've had in mind. Instead he'd gotten stuck a couple miles east of Brussels, Belgium, on the last day of what should've been his great European round-trip. Yeah, well. Train diverted, maybe a strike or something, or maybe someone'd just jumped on the tracks. The announcement had been in four languages, including English, but somehow Mike had still managed to understand none of them. In any case, first delay, then block. And now he was here. And his flight to New York would soon be gone without him.

What a way to be fucked over. Thirty days of tightly-scheduled city-hopping via bus and train, and only the very last blew up like this. Why had he thought that this would be a good idea? Inspiration for further novels, probably. Meeting other people, new ideas. The sort of reasons that sounded great when one was sitting bored at home. Once outside, though ... even at almost fifty he was still too shy to walk up to stranger and say hi, even more when he wasn't sure what language they would speak. Well, the cities had been great. And he'd never, *ever* lack ideas for overly long descriptions of architecture or food again, so there was that. Plus he could bore everyone he knew with the hundreds upon hundreds of badly-shot smartphone photos he'd made on this trip.

Three minutes after Mike thought it couldn't get any worse the train sprung to life and drove backwards out the station. The other passenger slowly trickled away; soon the platform was almost empty.

Ah, this day was shaping up just fine. Just the sort of impossibly stupid situation to put his characters in, safely writing away comfortable and warm back in New York, until at some point Will would come home from work, they'd kiss, possibly talk about what he'd written or what Will's newest art project was, maybe turn on the news. In short, the sort of thing that was interesting for a storyteller—hey, strange situation, unknown country, who knows what might happen—as long as it didn't involve the storyteller himself. But now here he was, with Will quite literally an ocean away.

If there were no trains, might there be a bus at least? Mike found a map, and read it by the light of his phone's flashlight. No good. Not only was it needlessly complicated—it appeared to show every last bus in the entirety of the city and its surroundings—but, after much searching, it also told him the last bus had gone half an hour earlier.

“Anyone joining me for a group taxi?”

Mike looked to who had spoken. Middle-aged man. American accent. A second tourist, then, and hopefully one who'd know better what to do.

“Sure.”

“Great. So, you know the number of a cab company?”

Ah.

Mike looked around. Only six other people were still there. Three of them also turned out to be tourists, and equally lost. Then there was an old French-speaking couple, and the last guy was from Czechia, and the only one who spoke fluent English (the tourists had a few words, as had the old French couple, except theirs were Dutch instead of English).

To top this off, they were in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Mike felt he should be able to help with that—he and Will had taken a couple courses on it years back. But even though he'd bought himself a language guide and tried to brush it up a bit, the first thing he'd learned during his two days in Amsterdam had been that he did not, in fact, speak Dutch.

It took them a quarter hour to call their taxi, mostly communicating in the universal language of holding thumbs up whenever someone said “taxi”. Finally the French guy dialed a number on Mike's phone, on which Mike ordered a taxi in English.

The driver, thank good, spoke both English and French. He took them to the next Metro station that wasn't blocked and charged them fifty euro for that. Divided by eight that meant an awful lot of small change, but at least the resulting bulge in Mike's wallet let him

pretend that there was actually something in there. Twenty-three euros now. He had travel insurance on the flight, and really hoped he'd be able to cash in on that. Otherwise there'd have to be a really embarrassing transatlantic text message. Will wouldn't let that down for *months*.

Once there the little group quickly dissolved, and Mike bought himself a Metro ticket. Another two euros and ten cents gone. It was almost midnight by the time he reached Gare du Midi—if one could find a hotel at this hour, then he guessed it'd be at the largest train station. He'd slept a little in the taxi, but exhaustion got him just the same; he could barely stand upright as he slurped into the first hotel's reception. Eyes already half-closed, he pleaded for a bed, cheapest one that was free, only to be told there not only was the cheapest one gone, but that in fact absolutely *all* beds were gone. Mike nodded, not really understanding, and, leaning heavily on his luggage, walked back out again.

It was the same in the next. In the third, a kind woman at the reception told him something about tourist season and some summit and that he didn't stand a chance if he hadn't booked it weeks in advance. He tried another two hotels before conceding that she'd been right.

What now? He still had his metro ticket. It had a one-hour limit on it; if he went back through the barriers in time maybe he could just drive circles the entire night. Those plastic seats were by no means a bed, but it'd be warmer in a train than it was outside.

Of course that didn't work out either. Not quite an hour after midnight the Metro closed down. Sigh. This wasn't New York, he should've known they didn't go twenty-four hours a day. At least he hadn't been on the far end of the network.

Blinking near the edge of sleep, he shunted his luggage out onto the third platform today. There he tried to orientate himself; he had no idea what station he was at. But it appeared he'd picked a good one: cleaner than most, warm, and *huge*. It took him a moment to process that not only was there a bridge within an underground train station, but that also the bridge was large enough to carry rails for *another* station. What the hell. The station was decorated—if one could call it

that—with an uncharacteristic number of flags, but Mike, who mostly lived in a city where each subway car displayed the stars and stripes, barely noticed this.

Instead of benches he found only rows of seats with armrests in between. Lying across them was no good. Maybe if he'd get all his clothes out the luggage and spread them out to make it softer ...

No, that way he'd only get his stuff stolen. Plus, if he was unable to sleep here, so what? He'd done sleepless nights before. Sure, that'd been years back, and mostly because he'd forgotten time and written on some story the entire night, but ... hm, well maybe that meant he should start to write something. Would give him something to do. Mike got his notebook and pen—he always had some within easy reach—and began scrawling away.

He got halfway through a depressing and presumably terrible sci-fi story before he found himself ejected from the station. The security officer who told him he had to go was polite (and spoke English, too), but the message was still pretty clear. Well, what had he thought? If they closed the Metro, of course they'd also close the station.

Given this day's track record, he was not surprised to find the first exit he found shut by barrier tape. Whatever, he managed to get out in the end. Surprisingly, he found himself a little more awake. Maybe it was the air; it had gotten cold outside.

Where now? With no clear goal, he simply followed the street.

Not much later he found a square full of vans with satellite dishes on them. Huh. Some even had the lights still on, and a few people were hurrying around as well.

Who would camp out at night in the middle of a city?

First thought was Apple fans, but then ... hell, *he* had once waited a night in front of a shop because of a new DnD rulebook. *Shit brain, was it really necessary to remind me of that?* He'd almost forgotten. Had been a terrible night. He'd been fifteen or something, and ... well, looking back, he guessed he must've been depressed. Not that he'd realized it at the time. His friends, DnD weekends, that'd been all

that'd kept him going. He'd gladly jumped at any opportunity to get out his house, even if it meant a night camping in front of a bookstore.

Shit, but he'd been depressed. He'd forgotten that, pushed it all away, but now, looking at this inexplicable gathering of newsvans—for that was what they were, he saw now, TV trucks, journalists walking around with cameras and microphones—it was all too easy to remember. Most vans here were white, too, without the satellite dishes they'd almost look like—

Stop that!

Mike waked further, determined not to stumble now. A bit further, at first hidden behind the other vans but now coming more and more into view ... Mike almost couldn't believe it. Food stalls, one, two, and *open* well past midnight. Suddenly his exhaustion gave way to hunger. The last he'd eaten had been a few hundred miles away, in Frankfurt, some weird green mud with boiled potatoes during the early afternoon. *God* that had tasted weird, but apparently it was traditional. And, well, learning cultures and all that; if he didn't talk to people he could at least shun the train station's McDonalds and try some local food.

But if in nothing else, in that he was in luck; the traditional food of Brussels, he'd learned that on his first visit, were mussels ... and cheap French fries sold along the streets. Well, Belgian fries, he guessed. Pretty good, anyways.

He pushed his luggage closer. These here weren't so cheap (four euro fifty), but still good. He got something called "Sauce Américaine" to go with it, which despite being from the place he'd heard of before. He also bought the most sugary drink they had, and afterwards imagined that he felt a little more awake.

Then he sat down on his luggage and ate, still unclear what this weird midnight gathering was about. Every now and then some of the journalists would hurry away and vanish in the streets. Others joined him and bought something to eat. Now that he paid attention to them, these people looked pretty worn out, too, when they walked up to the box to buy some fries ...

... or waffles. The second food van sold waffles. Mike usually ignored waffles. On his city-hopping trip he'd spent close to two days in Brussels, but he'd not eaten a single one. Waffles just weren't for him.

Except ... maybe just this once. What could be so bad about a waffle? Belgian waffles were famous. He was a tourist. If he didn't think too much about it—and right now sleep limited his capacity to think anyways—then maybe ... it should work. And, he noticed when a journalists carried one past him, these here came with strawberries and chocolate sauce and thick slices of banana. That in itself was quite some argument.

So he wiped his fingers from the grease of the fries and walked up to the waffles stall. The woman inside looked at him, also tired and a obviously impatient. Right. This was usually the part where he started mumbling, insecure what words to use and with no idea of how to pronounce the local word for *please*. Even so, he gave his Dutch another try. The woman gave him a strange look and answered in English. Perfect English, in fact. American. Midwest, probably. Tired as he was, he'd always notice that accent. Once upon a time he'd spoken it himself, and then worked hard to loose and forget it.

Fruit and chocolate? Sure. Fruit and chocolate. For some reason, she gave him extra whipped cream as well, which made what he got less a waffle and more a towering monstrosity. When he got his wallet out she invited him to sit on one of the camping chairs set up behind the van and told him to pay later.

Mike was too tired to wonder; he just dragged his luggage next to a chair and sat down. But as soon as he'd taken the first bite of this famous Belgian specialty he knew he'd made a mistake. Its reputation was entirely justified; the waffle was the best he'd ever eaten, but ...

But.

Waffles. This one wasn't round; in fact, it barely looked like an Eggo at all. Eggos were little squishy round things which made a sad excuse for anything; these here were huge rectangular blocks larger than his hand. He wished Will were here; in his hands this thing would probably make a midday meal.

But for all these differences, he knew he would not get his thoughts away from Eggos. And with them, of course, came *her* face. And the guilt. And everything else, all the memories. That last letter she'd left before she ran away. Her precise and almost coldly logical explanation of why she could no longer stay in Hawkins, or indeed have any contact with her friends at all. That'd been a few days before Mike's fifteenth birthday, and long before he'd been able to leave that shithole town behind. By the time he had, there'd been no trace of her. Three decades, and mostly Mike was happy, but sometimes ... sometimes it just bubbled up again.

Waffles. He'd been munching it, slowly, but suddenly he couldn't stand it any longer. He had to get this thing out of his sight, had to get rid of it no matter how delicious it was. If he could just throw it away ... but no. He'd not even paid for it yet; he'd not just throw it in a trashcan like some uncaring asshole. That left him only one obvious option: Mike stuffed bite after bite into him, without looking, trying not to notice it at all. The taste was heavenly, and even thirty-three years later it made him sick.

"Hey."

He looked up to find the woman from the waffle stall in the chair opposite to his.

"Something not right with the waffle?"

For a moment he was dumbfounded and just stared at her. Though her hair might be greyish, her face seemed a little younger. He decided she must be about his age. Something about her set him on guard; but he could not tell what or why. Eventually he realized she'd asked him something.

"Uh, no. It's great. Best I ever had, in fact." He gave her his best uncertain smile.

She made a thin smile in return, and suddenly a wave of déjà-vu rushed over Mike. Those eyes ... Mike noticed that he was staring, and quickly turned away. His eyes slid over the heap of journalists and their transmission vans.

“What’s all this, anyways?” He asked it more to change the subject than because he was interested.

For a moment there was incredulous silence. “You’re kidding me, right? *How* can you be here and not know?” Her accent ... *sounds like Hawkins*. It was almost painful to hear it.

He tried to laugh, but it came out forced. “I’m not, I really don’t know.”

For a moment longer she stared. Then—

“EU summit. European Council, I think. Or maybe Council of the EU, I never could tell those two apart. All the heads of the member states at one table, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Chancellors and stuff. It’s officially supposed to end at something like six pm for dinner, but it never does. They just keep talking. God knows what they’re still doing in there; I sure don’t. Probably just screaming at each other by now. They never seem very happy about it, but they do it every few months, and there’s never a compromise that’s not made last-minute.”

“Ok.”

Silence settled again.

“Is that yours?”

Reluctantly, he turned back towards her. She had some cheap paperback in her hands, the sort that would inevitably fall apart if you read it too often. Mike hated those; he’d had more than one vocal argument because he didn’t want his books in so cheap a packaging. It felt like betraying his readers.

“No.” His books were all safely stowed away in his luggage.

“No, I didn’t mean if it’s your copy. I meant, did you write it?”

Mike hadn’t even glanced at the title. In the dim light, reading was difficult, but ... he saw she held a battered old copy of *Hidden Turnings*. Oh. *That* book. This day had a way of confronting him with things that he didn’t like.

“Yeah,” he said, almost embarrassed.

“Could you sign it?”

For a moment he hesitated. As writers went, Mike knew he wasn’t unsuccessful, but it was still rare for stranger to ask him for an autograph. He’d never allowed images of him next to the About-the-author-texts, and he wasn’t one to do many interviews or panels either; he simply didn’t want to get recognized. Will liked to tease him about it, telling him that he was still that nerdy little boy he’d been in middle school, too nervous to talk to anyone but his friends. Except it wasn’t really teasing, because Will was absolutely right and they both knew it. That was just who he was. In the logic of fame he was a paradox: not unsuccessful, but averse to limelight.

So most people simply didn’t know what he looked like. Mike wondered if he should say that he’d misspoken, or maybe that this great author which she so adored was homeless for the night.

But instead he took his pen out, took the book and signed it. *Mike Byers*. Still not his legal name.

Probably the first copy of *Hidden Turnings* that he’d ever signed. To say that the book had been unsuccessful would’ve been an understatement; he’d published it almost ten years ago and the first edition still hadn’t sold out. Not that it had ever been a book for bestseller lists. He’d written it because he’d *had* to write it, sooner or later, and had wanted to be done with it.

Hidden Turnings. What did you get if you turned something round? Why, the same thing, upside-down, of course. And if you hid it as you turned it?

Then you got Mike’s life. Well, his childhood, at least.

He’d never intended to publish it. But he’d sent it to his agent, because authors were supposed to do that, and since his last one had sold pretty well it’d gone right to the press without anyone batting much of an eye. Hey, starpower would sell it if nothing else did, right? Except when it came to it no one really wanted to read about anyone’s real life. Real lives were messy and without proper plotlines.

Up until today he'd only known one person who actually liked the book, and that wasn't even him but Will.

Now that he had it in his hands again he suddenly felt an intense need to flip through these pages, search for something, something that he'd forgotten, something that was very, very important ...

He handed it back to her.

The woman looked at his signature for a while. *They try not to show it, Mike thought, but they're always disappointed when they can't decipher my scrawl.*

"Are you married, then?"

The question came so unexpected that the answer, stammering, was out before he'd thought it through. "Uh, no. Not legally, anyways."

Suddenly he wondered if he should clarify that, no, he wasn't out this late because he was looking for a hookup. He wasn't that sort of guy, just as he wasn't the sort of author who gave interviews.

"How'd you get the name then, if you didn't marry Will?"

He was too tired. That was the only explanation why he didn't wonder how she knew Will—the About-the-author-texts might say that he lived with his partner, but they gave neither Will's name nor his gender. Instead he simply answered.

"Will started at NYU a year before I did."

Will had gone there on a scholarship. Mike after two unfulfilling semesters of law at Yale and a big fight with his father.

"We'd promised each other that we'd support each other if we ever needed help. We all did, me, Will, E—Dustin, Lucas and Max—" he'd almost mentioned El there; it was still easy to slip up when listing them like this "—so when I couldn't find an apartment in New York he let me move in with him, and for the next four years we shared his one-and-a-half room apartment. Except we never changed the sign on the mailbox. Neither of us thought much of it—I mean, we had other things to do—but eventually my mother called to complain that I

never answered her letters. Turns out the post won't deliver mail when your name's not on the box. I told my mum that, and after that she'd just address her letters to *Byers*, and trust us to recognize that those were for me and not Will. And then later, when I started sending out stories to publishers I put *Mike Byers* on the return envelope. I dunno. It's probably a pretty stupid reason."

Of course, consequentially a lot of other stuff had also happened, starting one rainy morning when Will'd complained about how hard it was to find his mail amidst a pile of rejection slips that were all meant for Mike. *You're doing that on purpose!* he'd accused, and Mike, half asleep, had mumbled over a cup of coffee that he just liked having Will's last name on his mail. Well, things had sort of snowballed after that. They'd still been young. Maybe a little foolish as well. If their dads had know what they'd done a couple weeks later, snuggled up together in Mike's bed—well, they'd probably disowned them (Ted Wheeler *had* found out, but only years later when he'd seen the name on the cover of Mike's first bestseller, and by then Mike had had enough money not to care).

Suddenly Mike realized he'd just told all this to a complete stranger. His face lit up bright red, embarrassed. *Still that nerdy boy who can't talk to anyone*, Will would've said if he'd been here, laughing. Either you don't talk at all or you just don't know where to stop. *Shut up, Will. You're still the same, too. Also, you love that nerdy fifty-year-old boy who can't talk to anyone.*

It took a conscious effort to look into her in the eyes again. Except suddenly the woman wasn't a stranger anymore, and Mike knew what that déjà-vu had been about, or what he'd have searched for in that book.

He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it sooner. It couldn't be. Last he'd seen her he'd been fourteen, going on fifteen ... and yet here she was. Hair going gray, sure, a few wrinkles on her face; the years did not just pass one by unnoticed. And yet ...

"El ..." the name was a whisper, barely audible above the sounds from the streets.

Her face was a smile. "Hello Mike. I wondered how long I'd take you

to figure it out.”

2. Chocolate for Breakfast

It took him a couple seconds to remember what'd happened when he woke up, and then another couple to realize that it'd all been real. He was in El's apartment. It almost felt like home. Sure, the room wasn't his, the ceiling the wrong color, the mattress not the same, but ... it felt cared for. Hotel rooms are always somehow impersonal, too orderly, too clean; it's always obvious that no one lives in these for long.

And this was *El's* home. He'd spent years almost doubting that she'd existed at all; terrified that he'd gone mad or that she'd been some collective illusion of him and his friends.

It was comfortable here. He could've stayed in this bed all day.

Then he saw the clock next to the bed. Eleven thirty. *Shit*. How could it be this late?

It was weird to sleep eight hours and wake up at noon. It'd been two am or so when this weird Council meeting had finally ended. El had offered to close her waffle van earlier, but he wouldn't have her do that just for him.

By quarter past they'd been driving, trying hard to avoid the convoys of security that escorted the various heads of states back to their planes or hotel rooms, and at half past two they'd been at El's apartment. She'd showed him the guest room, but Mike had asked for WiFi first—he'd had to get to the Airline's website to see what he could do about that flight. It'd been well past three when he'd finally fallen asleep.

Still. Time flies. He had to get up; he couldn't just lie in El's spare bed forever.

Grunting, he tore the blanket off him and got up. For a moment he thought of a boy beneath another blanket who'd been too sick for school but sprung up healthy as soon as his mother'd closed the door. Well, no longer. Age took its toll; his days of quickly jumping out of bed were over.

And yet he felt impossibly giddy. El was alive. Not only alive, but *here*. Though in hindsight, it maybe wasn't so surprising. Where else would she be but in a city world-renowned for waffles?

Mike dressed, and almost hit his arm on the old desk where his laptop stood now. He looked out the window. Bright day outside. Down below was a thin one-way street, with traffic squeezing through.

After that he went exploring. The door out the guest room led into a narrow hallway, chock-full of stuff. All sorts of things lay around, boxes, souvenirs from holiday trips, a chair, stacks of books on the ground and rows of them along the walls. He remembered that the El he'd known had always had trouble reading; he'd often fantasied about teaching her, reading the *Hobbit* with her, or ... in the end, they'd never had the time. He supposed that someone else must've taught her by now, or, from how he'd known her, she'd just been stubborn enough to learn it all herself. He skimmed the titles, and, yep, there were his entire literary outpourings right in center-stage. Apart from that a few more horror books, a bit of fantasy and more science-fiction than he had himself. A few works by Stephen King. Those looked a bit battered, as if often read. Quietly, he admired her for that. He'd read *It* once and never again; it'd struck much too close to home. Some more books in Dutch, which he didn't recognize, an extra shelf in French, which he couldn't read. Well, apart from the obvious ones: even he knew who *Jules Verne* or *Alexandre Dumas* were.

Suddenly Mike realized he was essentially spying on her stuff, whereupon he quickly moved on down the hallway.

He found a kitchen and a bathroom, but no El. The living room looked very large to him; was this normal size for one person? The one in his and Will's apartment was smaller, though he guessed that maybe New York was just more expensive. Still, it was pretty large, at least until he realized that maybe El didn't live alone. Shit, maybe she was married. Maybe she had *kids*. What was he to do if he suddenly ran into some rampant teenager with superpowers?

Calm down, Mike told himself. *She'd have warned you. Right?*

But he couldn't quite shed the last bit of uncertainty.

Feeling out of place, Mike went back to the guest room. His phone still lay on the bedside table where he'd left it last night; the little LED for notifications was glowing. A text from Will.

You up yet? How's El? —Will, 8:30am

He'd sent Will a swath of messages late last night, and with seven hours between Brussels and New York Will had still been up to answer. *Wait —*

Will had sent that at 8:30? Shit, that was past one in the morning for him. He'd not seriously stayed up that long just for him, right?

Right?

Oh.

Of course he had. He was Will. Mike had to smile.

Get some sleep, dumbbo. —Mike, 11:43am

The text registered as "read" not thirty seconds later.

Am in bed, just got the phone next to me, with the alarm really loud so it'll wake me up when you write. Any news yet? —Will, 4:46am

Mike filled him in. *Will probably get a replacement flight, waiting for email from the airline. —Mike, 11:47am*

How's El? —Will, 4:47am

Am looking for her. I think she's out to work or something. Anyways, GO TO SLEEP. Seriously. —Mike, 11:48am

Mike shook his head and went back into the hallway. He was halfway to the front door when it opened. A man stepped in, maybe a few years older than Mike, graying hair. In front of him he carried an enormous box which he slowly maneuvered through the mess of books and memorabilia. Mike stood for an awkward moment, unsure what to do, before the man noticed him standing in his hallway.

“Ah, Bonjour,” he said. “Est-çe que tu es l’ami de Janie?”

Mike understood nothing but the first word. “Ahh...”

“Jij bent de vriend van Janie?”

Wait, that was Dutch, Mike spoke Dutch, he’d taken classes on that ...
“Ik ... ahh ...”

The man sighed. “English? You’re Janie’s friend?”

It still took him a second. *Janie*; he pronounced it French, with something like a soft *sh*-sound instead of an English *j*, and a long *ee* at the end. Mike guessed that must be El’s name now. Close enough to *Jane*, at least.

“Yeah.”

To his relief the man nodded. “I am Émile,” he said. “Janie is ... ah ... how do you say ... ” He gestured.

“Downstairs?”

“Yes! Downstairs.”

Mike said his thanks and squeezed past him to the door.

Downstairs was a café. Well, sort of; Mike’s mind wanted to label it as such, given that there were some tables and a sign informing you how much a cup of coffee or tea would cost you, but that was obviously not how this place was kept afloat. Most of the room was taken up by a thirty-foot counter that held nothing but chocolate.

El stood behind it, but since she was currently involved in a loud conversation (in French, so he had no idea what it was about) with a bunch of kids gathered at a table Mike kept quiet and sat down as far away from them as possible.

With nothing to do, he surveyed his surroundings. This was obviously a tourist shop, though not quite central enough to open to a pedestrianized street. Now that he had time to look he actually discovered that they *did* also at least have croissants and a few other pastries, though those were crammed into the far end of the counter. The place had an elegance to it; a lot of wood along the walls, nice old-fashioned café-chairs not unlike those he'd seen in Vienna or Budapest, even a bookshelf along the wall. In more cynical moments Mike would've concluded that this was all cheap show at having more depth than the other chocolate places in town to get the tourists in, but right now he was prepared to just accept that all as real.

He wondered what he was supposed to do next. Last night he'd had a goal. Two of them, in fact: find someplace where he could sleep, and get internet access fast enough to support the airline's website. Now he hadn't thought further than finding El again, which kind of left him stumped. What was he supposed to say?

More importantly, was it a good idea—both for his wallet and his health—to eat a plate of fine chocolate for breakfast? Sure, he could always go out and find someplace that had bread or even fries, but then he'd have to leave her again.

A couple tourists came in and looked at the display of chocolate. Before long the man he'd met upstairs—Émile—appeared as well and started serving them. El was still talking to the kids at the other table. One of them appeared to have brought a book with her, another had a notebook out and wrote something on it. A third had earplugs in and seemed entirely unaware of what was going on around him. Was that the reason why El talked to them, because they blocked the table for ages doing homework or whatever without ordering a thing?

No, probably not. Now that the man from upstairs had come back El had stepped out from behind the counter and closer to them so she didn't have to shout anymore. And she appeared to be enjoying herself, too; after a while someone made a joke (Mike assumed, not understanding a word) and they all laughed, El included (well, all except the boy with the earplugs, who kept on listening to whatever it was he was listening to). Huh. Usually kids weren't café regulars, where they? The boy that Mike had been hadn't, at least. Well, he'd never gone into diners or bars; Hawkins had been a little short on

cafés. On the other hand, if there'd been one with a bookshelf, maybe he would have been tempted ...

"Mike!"

Suddenly El stood in front of him.

"You slept well?"

God, had he been so lost in thought he'd not noticed she'd walked over?

"Ah, yeah, good. Thanks for the bed."

"Aw, come on. There's a bookshelf in my café, I can't just leave a starving author to sleep in the streets. Want anything to drink?"

"Thanks, uh ... just coffee would be fine."

"Coffee? And here I thought I had an honest friend. I remember you once tried coffee over at Will's. You spit it out and swore to never touch anything like it again." She giggled and went away.

Mike hadn't even remembered that.

It was weird that she talked so much. Not that she'd not always been outgoing; when she and Will had met, somehow two otherwise quiet people had turned into the most chaotic troublemakers Mike had ever known. But, well ... talking had always remained a problem for her. It'd gotten better, sure, but she'd never quite reached this level of effortless chattering with light jokes thrown in the mix. Or at least she hadn't when he'd known her.

"Author? What author?"

That was one of the kids, looking over to him. The one with the notebook; she'd closed it now, put her pen away, and was staring expectantly at him.

Two of her friends immediately interjected something, though of course they did it in French and left Mike clueless as to what was said. One burst out laughing, but the girl from before defiantly

ignored them and walked over to Mike's table.

"Are *you* an author?"

Mike felt almost annoyed. Not because of the girl, but because ... by what right did this, what, fourteen-year-old? thirteen-year-old? child speak English, or, for that matter, *any* second language good enough to listen in on conversations three tables over, when Mike, at fifty, still spoke only one? His three words of bad Dutch couldn't possibly count.

"On my better days," he said.

"And on the worse days?" Okay, so she had an accent. A horrible one, in fact; she sounded like a cliché on a comedy show. Still infinitely much better his Dutch.

"On my worse days I'm usually left alone." No. This wasn't fair. He couldn't just be mean to this girl; it wasn't her fault that his life was what it currently was. "On my worse days I'm a writer whose stories are too bad to get published," he conceded.

The girl considered this. "Wait ... are you Mike Byers?"

Mike had to sigh. "Yes." What had happened to the whole bit where he wasn't recognized by random people on the streets?

"Janie showed us the signature she got." Ah, that would explain it.

"You're too clever, Camille." El was back, and sat down next them. She'd brought coffee with her, which she handed to Mike. "Sorry about her. I didn't want to tell them who you are. Well, at least I'd have asked you first."

Mike stared at them both. "Why? Am I popular here, or ..."

El laughed. "Why do you think they're in my café? Two hints: it's not for the chocolate, and all your books are on that shelf, in French translation." She pointed.

At that Camille protested: "I also read books from other authors! And the here chocolate is good, too!"

El gave her a look. "You bought two pralines the entire last year."

"They're expensive!"

"*Two!*"

They paired off into a quick-paced argument in French interspersed with laughter, leaving Mike entirely perplexed. So El was essentially running a book-club in a café, with his works as the centerpiece. That was obviously absurd. He decided to drink his coffee. Finally the two calmed down a little.

"So ah ... you want me to sign something, too?"

"I ... I want to *be* an author." The girl blurted this out as if she was afraid to admit it, and for a moment she looked genuinely surprised that she'd done so. "I mean ... I read a lot. And I write stories, sometimes. I ..." She seemed embarrassed. "I wanted to ask you if you want to read them, but ..."

Mike could guess. "They're in French?"

"Yes." She showed him her notebook.

This was infuriating. Why was he incapable of reading in at least *one* other language?

"I could translate," El offered. The girl's eyes lit up. "It'd take a while, and Mike probably wants to fly back home before that, but if he wants I'll send him an email."

With that she had him cornered. This wasn't something that Mike did; if he read unedited, unpracticed stories then those were by Will, or maybe a close friend. Certainly not some thirteen-year-old he'd just met.

"Sure," he said.

"Really?"

"Really."

But El would not let Camille's moment of triumph last for long. "Now run," she said. "If you get the next Metro, you might still be in time for your sports club. You, back there!" she called to the other kids, "you too!"

"But—"

"You got about a minute."

"I don't have a ticket."

El looked unimpressed. "You *do* have a ticket, I caught you playing hide and seek in the station yesterday."

"But ... we hid!"

"Yeah, well, I'm not blind."

Finally Camille gave in and took her bag. Wryly, Mike recalled he'd been wondering if El had kids. Did that girl have a real mother as well, or did she just visit El for that?

Soon the kids were gone.

El sighed. "I'm getting too old," she said. "They'll be the death of me, I can tell you that already."

Mike chuckled.

"But I mean, I get sentimental at times, and ..."

Mike wasn't sure he followed. "Sentimental?"

"Yeah. Bunch of kids obsessed with fantasy and science fiction; remind you of anyone?"

"Oh." He'd not noticed that until now. "They play DnD as well?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Quentin and Manu, though, they do a lot of these online roleplay games; they talk about it all the time. Well, they do when Manu takes his earplugs out ..."

Mike sighed; he'd never become familiar with online games. "Time

moves on, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

They both fell silent. A question seemed to hover between them, which neither wanted to pronounce.

“So, ahm ...” Mike looked back behind the counter, where Émile was busy restocking the chocolate truffles. Evidently that’d been in his boxes. “Are you married?”

That wasn’t the question, obviously, just something else to talk about.

“No. I just ... I guess you could say we’re business partners. Sort of. When I first got here I was short on money, so we shared a flat. Then he got an offer to take over this place, and, well, we just stayed together. It was just a patisserie back at first, but then he started doing chocolate, and I had my waffles, and by now this is ... well, I don’t know. We still sell croissants, but mostly it’s a bunch of stuff thrown together, I guess. But no, we’re not married.”

For a moment silence reigned, and the unspoken question. This time it was El who thought of something else. “Why did you learn Dutch? You’re horrible at it, by the way.”

Mike had to smile. “Thanks. It was ... 2003, I think? Two or three, I’m pretty sure. Will and I had been living together since university, and, well, people always say Dutch is easy to learn. Plus the Netherlands had just become the first country in the world with gay marriage, so ... we just kind of went for it, had a couple classes.”

“You wanted to emigrate?”

They’d never really admitted that, even to themselves. Just a coincidence that they’d taken that course at that particular time. Nothing more to it. Honestly.

“I guess we considered it, for a while. I mean ... it’s not like the US had ever been particularly nice to us.”

Mike had meant gay people, but El said: “Yeah, with me neither.”

And with that they were back at the thing they didn't want to talk about. Shit.

"Where ... " Mike didn't know how to say it. But El knew how to answer.

"I tried living in the forest again, at first," she said. "I thought I'd manage that; just go back to how it'd been when I'd lived in Mirkwood that one winter. Though I went a bit further out this time. But ... they were always there, Mike. I never saw them, but ... I can feel when people are near. And even out in the Rockies I was never wholly alone."

She paused. Her voice had become quiet, talking about things that'd happened so long ago.

"So I went to my sister. Kali, remember her? Stayed with her for a while. Traveled around with her and her friends, before it got too much. All these people she had on her list ... but Kali can do illusions. She faked me a passport and documents, and the money for a plane ticket. I told her to come with me, but she said she'd not go until her work was done."

"You know what she'd doing now?"

El hesitated. "No." It sounded sad. "I never heard from her again. But she got me out. The plane was to Peru; we figured it was a country that nobody in the US really cared about. It was nice, actually. I'm quite good at physical jobs, you know, moving stuff around; just have to be careful no one looks too closely and have an excuse ready when my nose bleeds. I got by. I still miss the food sometimes. There's a couple Peruvian restaurants round here, but it's just not the same. Anyways, after a while ... they must've somehow tracked me there, I noticed them again. So I ran away further."

Mike tried to wrap his head around that. He'd not quite reached fifteen when El had vanished, just a few days before the government showed up. He'd still gone to school. Fuck, had he really been brooding over his math textbooks while she'd been in some other country running for her life? It seemed so unreal, but he guessed it must be true.

“Smuggled myself onto a container ship and ended up in China. Went through a couple countries after that; turns out border checkpoints are pretty easy to get through when you’re me. Actually ... you remember how Brenner originally wanted to use me to spy on the Soviets? It’s funny, I was just barely too late. Reached Kazakhstan not even two months after it declared independence. And with that, the end of the cold war ... I just hoped that whatever project I’d been a part of, that they’d dropped it. And it seems they did. I don’t seem to be on any international search lists, at least, and when I got into western Europe, countries allied to the US, nothing much happened. I guess the US just forgot about me. I didn’t originally intend to stay here, but ... what can I say? For years I’d lived nowhere for longer than a month or two, half a year at most, but when I arrived in Brussels I just ... just got stuck.”

“Too many waffles,” Mike joked.

El laughed at that. “Yeah, maybe. I guess it does feel more familiar here than in East Asia. Though actually ... they don’t sell Eggos here, you know? I’d always missed them. So a couple years ago I had a box of them shipped over here. Was terribly expensive, but I just wanted to have some again. I can’t believe I ever liked them, they tasted *horrible*.”

With that Mike was laughing, too. “Ever thought about going back?”

“What, to America?” She considered that for a moment. “I thought about it. Figured that even if they *do* still search for me, well, I don’t look fifteen anymore. Thought about trying to find you or the others, too ... but the US is a big place. And I mean, I can *find* people, you know? Just, close my eyes and I’ll know where they are. But for that ... well, you’ve gotten older, too. People change over time. I’d have needed a photograph.”

And there was never one in any of my books, Mike thought. That hurt. Hurt a lot. “Well, you’ve found me now.”

“Yeah,” she said, sounding half lost in memories. “I guess I have.” There was a pause, and then: “And you, what did you do all these years?”

“Oh,” he said, “not much.” He told her a bit about university, about that first room he’d shared with Will and how they’d lived together ever since. He told her of his books, of his regular fights with editors and publishers ... but mostly he told her about Will, and Lucas and Dustin and Max. The people she’d known. He could tell her less about Chief Hopper—the man must be well past seventy now, and Mike had not seen him now for decades. That was life, he guessed; people just drifted apart as time passed. It still hurt, that he could not tell her more about the man who’d almost been her father.

He told her of his trip, too; all the cities he’d visited, the tourist sights he’d been to. El suggested a couple that he missed, mostly obscure places that he’d never heard about (oh, Frankfurt? Been to that reconstructed Roman castle, I forget the name? No? Shame. It’s hidden in the middle of a forest. The exhibition’s pretty boring, but they make good sausages, after some ancient Roman recipe). Soon their conversation went on to other subjects—late trains, the abundance of one-way-streets in Brussels, Mike’s fascination at a drinking-horn shaped glass he’d seen the last time he’d been here. Even after all these years it was still easy to talk to her, and he almost wished it could be as it had been back then—but of course, there is a difference between being fifteen and fifty.

Finally, as they’d promised Camille, they exchanged email addresses, and since they were at it they swapped phone numbers as well. And while he had his phone out, Mike discovered he’d gotten an email from his airline. Return flight to New York, this afternoon. El told him where the nearest station was, and the best train to get to the airport.

Mike promised he’d come visit again, some time in the future. Transatlantic flights were expensive, sure, but whatever El had said, he didn’t want to risk her going through a US border check. The old anxiety, it was still around as well.

Well, really, he’d have to round them up, all the old friends; Will he shared an apartment with, but he’d have to call Lucas and Max, and Dustin, maybe even Jonathan and Nancy, Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers, too, so they could all meet El again. A café on another continent might be a strange place, but ... well, El was right, the waffles here were pretty good. Until then, El gave him seven little

bags of chocolate truffles, one for each her friends. They got Émile to take a photo of them with Mike's crappy smartphone camera, and then Mike got his luggage, they shared one last hug, and he was on his way again.

All in all, he guessed, it maybe hadn't been so bad that he'd missed that flight.

Notes for the Chapter:

So this is it. Apologies there isn't more backstory—I wanted to stay in the present, and I already feel I spent too much time having them discuss the past. Oh, by the way, that Roman castle near Frankfurt is real (as are their—actually really good—sausages, though occasionally they come with inexplicable slices of orange. Inexplicable both because—as far as I know—the Romans were unaware of oranges, and also it's just plain *weird* to have one with a sausage). And I have to disagree with El; for my part, I *did* like the exhibition when I was there.

I also just noticed that I ended this implying that a (adult) character called Mike will soon make a round of phone calls to all his childhood friends with whom he faced an alien monster. I'm *sure* that'll work out fine, I mean, when have we ever heard of such a setup going wrong?

Lastly, I know it's only two sentences, but although my Dutch and French might be better than Mike's language skills, they're both a far cry from the level where I'd like them to be, and I'm almost sure I must've gotten something wrong. Apologies for this.

Anyways, hoping you enjoyed this story (and working on another one which I hope I'll finish soon),

Gazyrlezon.

Author's Note:

So I'm not really sure what I wrote here. I mean, parts are recognizable: I once got stuck on an abandoned station the middle of nowhere at night (though I was going to another city), and I get slightly annoyed when they close Schuman (which is the Metro station Mike gets off) for Council meetings, or rather I get annoyed by the utterly *weird* way in which they close off the streets above it. And as far as I know, even in Brussels no one actually sells waffles an hour past midnight, but I needed an excuse to have them meet, and I appear to be incapable of writing scenes that take place on normal days.

Oh, and to clear up El's confusion (I'll just put this here, since an amazing lot of people—even politically interested Europeans—don't seem to know this): The thing meeting there is the European Council, i.e. all heads of EU member states (it's function is kinda vague, just that it's supposed to "set the long-term agenda"). There's also a Council of the EU, which consists of national ministers (and is involved in the legislature, together with Parliament and Commission), and a Council of Europe, which is a completely unrelated organisation promoting human rights and has nothing whatsoever to do with the EU, although all EU states are also Council of Europe members (no, I have no idea how we ended up in this situation ... but I mean, if it wasn't confusing this wouldn't be Europe, so, whatever). It is also true that these meetings usually take a *lot* longer than they're supposed to—somewhat famously, they allegedly just [stop the room's clock at 11:45pm](#) if they're out of time and there's a deadline at midnight.

Anyways, I've got a second (and final) chapter written which I'll publish tomorrow. I hoped you

liked this one!

Gazyrlezon.